

# From the ground up



Pete Pace, construction tech instructor at Great Falls High School, right, explains a laser level to Austin Shupe as a backhoe digs the foundation of the high school house located at 2418 1st Ave. N. on Thursday afternoon. TRIBUNE PHOTO/LARRY BECKNER

## **‘Patriotic’ home-building effort begins**

NeighborWorks and Great Falls public schools, which team up each year to construct two houses sold to low-income buyers, are making an extra effort to use only American-made materials this year.

They're following the example of a Bozeman man who received national attention after he constructed an all-American home last year.

"I just want to raise the flag and salute it," Mike Picking, president of teacher's union Great Falls Education Association, said of the decision by the schools and NeighborWorks to buy American. "It's patriotic. It's American. It just makes sense."

Picking recommended the made-in-America approach after his sister-in-law in Bozeman told him about a news story she had seen on ABC News in May on Anders Lewendal.

Lewendal, of Bozeman, built his entire home with only American-made materials.

Lewendal gave a presentation on his approach to the Great Falls educators and NeighborWorks officials before they launched the made-in-America houses project in Great Falls.

American public education students are constructing a home that will be occupied by Americans, Picking pointed out, and they should use American-made materials.

If more people would start building with American products it would boost jobs, said Keith Nelson, NeighborWorks construction manager, and Les Pedersen, construction foreman.

On Thursday morning, 24 Great Falls High School students in an advanced industrial technology class taught by teacher Pete Pace wore blue construction helmets as they gathered for a groundbreaking to mark the beginning of construction of a home at 2418 1st Ave. N.

Orange spray paint marked the outline of the 952-square-foot home that will have a full basement, two baths and three bedrooms. The home will be sold for about \$140,000 to a first-time, low-income home buyer sometime this spring, Nelson said.

Students in teacher Landon Stubb's class at C.M. Russell High School will construct a second home at 2418 1st Ave. N. Stubbs was once a student in the class he's now teaching.

"Then we have a family that will be a very happy family at the end of the year," NeighborWorks' Sheila Rice told a small crowd that gathered at the 1st Avenue North construction kickoff.

To qualify, buyers need to complete a home-buyer education class and qualify for a first mortgage from the lender, and their income must fall below 80 percent of adjusted median income for Cascade County.

The schools and NeighborWorks, a not-for-profit that builds affordable housing in Great Falls, have teamed up since 1996 to construct two new homes a year.

The two homes constructed in the coming year will be the 30th and 31st.

Industrial trade students get hand-on experience, Nelson said. NeighborWorks gets inexpensive labor in constructing moderately priced homes for low-income, first-time home buyers.

NeighborWorks supplies the materials. The public schools supply the labor, keeping the cost of the homes affordable to the buyers, Nelson said.

Constructing the homes gets some students excited about pursuing trade work, Pace said. The students who do the work are in an advanced industrial technology placement course. They work during two-hour class periods.

For students who will pursue other careers, the work give them self-reliance in working on their own homes when they purchase them in the future, Pace said.

Matt Huntting, a 17-year-old Great Falls High senior, is one of the students who will build the 1st Avenue North home throughout the school year. He also helped to build a house last year. He's learned a lot of different constructions skills in the advanced placement class, he said. That includes pouring foundation footings and performing dry-wall work.

"And it's a fun class, too," he said. "It's a good opportunity to get away from school a little do something interactive, more hands on."

Rice said the collaboration between the schools and NeighborWorks also includes the city of Great Falls, which awards some of its share of federal community block grants to finance construction.

The not-for-profit will end up receiving \$60,000 to \$65,000 in federal funding to construct the 1st Avenue North home, she said. The funding will be "recycled" when the homes are sold and earmarked for use in future projects, she said.

Achieving 100 percent American-made homes won't be easy because, these days, many materials are constructed overseas, Nelson and Pedersen said.

"We're trying to switch that trend," Nelson said.

For example, much lumber used in the United States to build homes is manufactured in Canada, Nelson said.

Construction managers will try to buy lumber in the United States, along with nails, screws, siding, plumbing and heating supplies and other materials.

Progress will be tracked through the yearlong building schedule and what percentage of U.S. materials used won't be known until the houses are constructed, Nelson said.

Even boosting the amount of U.S.-made materials by 10 percent can benefit the country because it creates jobs, Nelson added.

For more info

To find out more about how you can purchase a NeighborWorks home, call 406-791-5861.

ID\_Code: G1-309060021